

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 01470 041538Z
ACTION SS-25

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S E C R E T DAMASCUS 1470

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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PROF, SY, US
SUBJECT: SYRIAN JEWS

REF: DAMASCUS 1294

1. DCM MET WITH JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADER TOUTAH AND PROMINENT COMMUNITY MEMBER MAURICE NOSSEIRI MARCH 3 TO DISCUSS WHAT ACTIONS COMMUNITY NOW CONTEMPLATING IN LIGHT OF RELAXATION OF RESTRICTIONS. DCM RECALLED TOUTAH'S AND OTHER COMMUNITY LEADERS' COMMENTS REGARDING PROBLEM JEWISH WOMEN HAD IN FINDING HUSBANDS. AS RESULT AMERICAN CONGRESSMAN HAD RAISED THIS MATTER OFFICIALLY WITH SARG. SARG HAD NOW INDICATED TO US THAT ALTHOUGH IT NOT OPENING DOOR TO EMIGRATION, IT WAS PREPARED TO BE MORE LENIENT RE FOREIGN TRAVEL. WE THEREFORE THOUGHT IT WAS TIME FOR THE COMMUNITY TO PRESENT A FEW TEST CASES.

2. TOUTAH REPLIED THAT HIS UNDERSTANDING FROM SYRIAN G-2 AUTHORITIES (MILITARY SECURITY) WAS THAT JEWS WOULD BE ALLOWED TO APPLY FOR PASSPORTS TO TRAVEL ABROAD FOR THREE PURPOSES: BUSINESS, HEALTH TREATMENT AND FAMILY VISITS. HE SAID G-2 OFFICIAL HAD TOLD HIM SPECIFICALLY

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THAT APPLICATIONS OF YOUNG, UNMARRIED PERSONS OF EITHER SEX WOULD NOT BE APPROVED.

3. TOUTAH FURTHER SAID THAT HIS RELATIONS AT PRESENT WITH MILITARY SECURITY OFFICE RESPONSIBLE FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY AFFAIRS WERE POOR OWING TO THE RECENT ILLEGAL EMIGRATION OF TWO JEWISH YOUTHS ACROSS THE BORDER TO TURKEY

(REFTEL). BECAUSE OF THIS INCIDENT, HE SAID, APPROVAL OF PASSPORT APPLICATIONS HAD BEEN SLOWED DOWN. THERE WERE CURRENTLY SOME THIRTY APPLICATIONS FOR PERMISSION TO TRAVEL TO JORDAN. FOLLOWING RELAXATION OF INTERNAL TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS LAST NOVEMBER, SYRIAN JEWS HAD BEEN ABLE TO TRAVEL TO JORDAN ON THEIR IDENTITY CARDS (AS OTHER SYRIANS DO) WITHOUT THE NECESSITY OF OBTAINING PASSPORTS. RECENTLY, HOWEVER, SYRIAN BORDER OFFICIALS HAD REFUSED TO LET THEM LEAVE WITHOUT AN "AUTHORIZATION" (ARABIC "TASRIIH") FROM MILITARY SECURITY.

4. TOUTAH SAID HE THOUGHT THE COMMUNITY'S PROBLEMS IN THIS RESPECT WOULD PERSIST UNTIL HE WAS ABLE TO OBTAIN AN AUDIENCE WITH PRESIDENT ASAD AND DISCUSS THE MATTER DIRECTLY WITH HIM. UNTIL THEN, THE MILITARY SECURITY AUTHORITIES WOULD INTERPRET THE REGULATIONS AS THEY WISHED.

5. DCM SAID HE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE HELPFUL IF U.S. RELATIVES OF SYRIAN JEWS WROTE THEM LETTERS INVITING THEM FOR A VISIT. SUCH LETTERS COULD HELP SUPPORT PASSPORT APPLICATIONS AND MIGHT GIVE EMBASSY GROUNDS ON WHICH TO TRY TO HELP IF A PROBLEM DEVELOPED. NOSSEIRI THOUGHT THIS WAS A GOOD IDEA, BUT TOUTAH DID NOT REPLY EXCEPT TO SAY THAT NOW THE AMERICANS, TOO, WERE PUTTING PRESSURE ON HIM. AT DCM'S SUGGESTION, HE AGREED TO MEET AGAIN MARCH 6 TO DISCUSS THE PROBLEM FURTHER. HE FIRMLY COUNTERED DCM'S SUGGESTION THAT RABBI HAMRA BE INCLUDED IN THE MEETING, SAYING THIS WAS A POLITICAL RATHER THAN A RELIGIOUS SUBJECT.

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6. COMMENT: IT IS APPARENT THAT SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY HAS NOT GOTTEN FROM ITS ESTABLISHED G-2 CONTACTS THE SAME SIGNALS EMBASSY HAS BEEN GIVEN. THIS COULD BE RESULT OF SEVERAL FACTORS: NORMAL SLOWNESS OF SYRIAN BUREAUCRACY IN ABSORBING NEW DIRECTIVES, AS SHIHABI PREDICTED TO ME; DIFFERENCES IN STYLE AND PRESENTATION BETWEEN FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIAL WHO FIRST BRIEFED US OF JANUARY 10 DECREE AND BRIEFING GIVEN TOUTAH BY MILITARY SECURITY OFFICIAL ABOUT DECREE; AND/OR THE WAY THE RESPECTIVE LISTENERS UNDERSTOOD THE NEWS. TOUTAH'S INSTINCTS NOT TO ROCK THE BOAT HAVE BEEN SO FINELY HONED OVER THE YEARS THAT HE, HIMSELF, COULD HAVE FILTERED OUT CERTAIN POSITIVE INDICATIONS BECAUSE OF THE "RISKS" THEY MIGHT ENTAIL. FINALLY, I CANNOT COMPLETELY RULE OUT THE POSSIBILITY THAT SARG MAY HAVE SOUGHT TO FEED EMBASSY A TRANQUILIZER ON THIS ISSUE. IF SO, IT HAS ONLY SUCCEEDED IN INCITING RENEWED INTEREST AND ACTIVITY BY ALL OF US CONCERNED WITH PROBLEM.

7. WHEN DCM MEETS AGAIN WITH TOUTAH MARCH 6, I HAVE ASKED HIM TO INFORM TOUTAH OF THE POINTS OF THE JANUARY 10 DECREE AS THEY WERE TRANSMITTED TO US BY FOREIGN MINISTRY (THOUGH NOT SHOUFFI'S INTERPRETATIONS OF THESE POINTS). THIS MAY HELP BOLSTER HIS CONFIDENCE THAT SARG IS PREPARED TO BE MORE LENIENT ON TRAVEL ABROAD AND MARRIAGE TO FOREIGNERS.

8. ON FURTHER REFLECTIONS I ALSO BELIEVE IT WILL MAKE MORE SENSE TO PUSH TOUTAH TO IDENTIFY TWO OR THREE SPECIFIC CASES OF YOUNG WOMEN WHO WILL BE WILLING TO TRAVEL, ALONE OR WITH OTHER FAMILY MEMBER(S), TO VISIT U.S. RELATIVES THAN TO USE THE BROADER APPROACH WHICH I DISCUSSED WITH GEORGE GRUEN OF ENCOURAGING U.S. RELATIVES OF 130 SYRIAN JEWISH YOUNG WOMEN TO WRITE INVITING THEM FOR A VISIT. DEPARTMENT COULD THEN ENCOURAGE U.S. RELATIVES OF THESE SPECIFIC WOMEN TO WRITE THEM LETTERS OF INVITATION
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AND WE WOULD THEN BE BETTER ABLE TO MONITOR THE COURSE OF THEIR APPLICATIONS HERE, INCLUDING INTERVENTION WITH SHIHABI AS NECESSARY.
MURPHY

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